

ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN MALAYSIA FOLLOWING THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN¹

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ABSTRACT

The August 2021 re-assumption of power by the Taliban, twenty years after being ousted from power in Afghanistan by the military might of the United States of America (USA), was generally welcomed by Muslims in Malaysia. Many of them had treated the USA's initial incursions into Afghanistan with ambivalence. While empathising with Americans who were at the receiving end of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Malaysian Muslims generally frowned upon the USA's military assaults and installation of a puppet government in Afghanistan as blowing things out of proportion. As far as Malaysians were concerned, in a space of twenty years, the USA's reputation had plunged from a being a paragon of democracy to being a perpetrator of horrible human rights abuses in Afghanistan. As for Taliban 2.0, Malaysian Muslims treated with equivocation. They were aware of Taliban's past unsavoury reputation in such matters as women's rights, minority rights and modern education, but they were not prepared to see their Muslim brethren in

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Afghanistan suffer much longer under the rule of a foreign occupier. Taliban's own record of regressive rule notwithstanding, they were at least fellow Afghans who were more in touch with the religio-cultural sensitivities of the ordinary Afghan populace. From the interviews we conducted among stakeholders of post-Taliban 2.0 Afghanistan-related policies in Malaysia, we discovered that Malaysian Muslims were open to giving the Taliban 2.0 administration a chance to prove its worth in the management of the country, for want of a better alternative. Continually viewing Taliban 2.0 as a terrorist entity, as the USA was inclined to do, would be counter-productive at a time when the national economy was in doldrums and the population was suffering. On the still the critical issue of how Islamists would respond, given the Islamic Party of Malaysia's (PAS: *Parti Islam SeMalaysia*) media statements declaring support for Taliban 2.0, this research, found that PAS's impulsive riposte was an isolated sentiment that did not resonate with other Islamists in Malaysia whose response was one of cautious optimism with regard to the rise of Taliban 2.0. Help to Afghanistan from Malaysian Islamists have focused on humanitarian assistance rather than jihadist accoutrements. While it would be too early at this stage to dismiss altogether the impact of Taliban 2.0's triumph in Afghanistan to Islamist extremism in Malaysia, the researchers believe that the ramifications, if any, should not be exaggerated either.

Keywords: Islam, Islamism, Malaysia, extremism, Taliban 2.0, Afghanistan

Introduction

For Malaysians, there was much to rejoice over the United States of America's (USA) withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan that proceeded swiftly once it had evacuated the Bagram air base on 1 July 2021. On the eve of Malaysia's own 64th anniversary of independence on 31 August 2021, the last batch of USA army personnel departed from Kabul airport on 30 August amidst chaotic scenes of desperation from Afghans who were left at the mercy of the Taliban, the group made up of former *madrrasah* (religious schools) students who ruled the country from 1996 until its USA-engineered downfall in October 2001. Upon securing power as the reputedly USA-trained Afghan army capitulated with hardly a fight, the Taliban declared 'full independence' for Afghanistan whose official independence day was 10 days earlier on 19 August, commemorating the conclusion of the Anglo-Afghan Treaty of 1919. As Malaysians braced to celebrate their own freedom from British colonial rule on 31 August 1957 as the then Federation of Malaya, news of

the Taliban's triumphant re-emergence as Afghanistan's ruling bloc was generally welcomed by Malaysians as a defeat of Western colonialism. Reports of past Taliban brutalities in 1996-2001 aside, Malaysia's Malay vernacular media did not mince their words in their hope that Taliban 2.0 would not be a repeat of Taliban 1.0's excesses (cf. Muhammad Khalil 2021b). To the lay Afghan in favouring the Taliban over the USA, it was a case of 'better the devil you know than the devil you don't.' Moreover, in a matter of a few years, evidence had abounded that the USA and its allies, far from being the defender of freedom and democracy that they claimed to be, had committed unspeakable atrocities against Afghan civilians in their mission to ostensibly uproot the Taliban from areas outside the capital city of Kabul (Real Stories 2003a; Willacy, Callinan and Blucher 2020). Such civilian casualties were registered up to the verge of USA's withdrawal, in last-ditch operations to ward off assaults by Taliban's militant rival, the ISIS-affiliated Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K) (Plett-Usher 2021).

Around twenty years earlier, the USA had invaded Afghanistan on the pretext of extinguishing the security threat that emanated from the Al Qaeda terrorist outfit led by Osama ben Laden (1957-2011). Al Qaeda had orchestrated the hijacking of four commercial flights and crashed them into the World Trade Centre in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington DC and the Pennsylvania countryside – events referred to henceforth as 9-11 – resulting in the deaths of close to 3000 civilians. The Taliban had effectively protected Osama by refusing to surrender him for prosecution in the USA, thus incurring the wrath of President George W. Bush whose doctrine of 'if you are not with us, you are against us' sanctioned pre-emptive strikes against uncooperative states in its Global War on Terror (Frontpagemagazine.com 2002). The USA's punitive action against the Taliban was taken even though only a few years earlier, during President Clinton's administration and its Al Qaeda links notwithstanding, the USA had sought the Taliban's cooperation, in devising a secret plan to build a pipeline cutting through Afghanistan from Central Asia in a bid to tap the region's abundant oil and gas reserves (Real Stories 2003b). Through its financial and intelligence support of the Afghan resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), the USA could not wash its hands from claims that it had created both Taliban and Al Qaeda, which originated from the *Maktab al-Khidmat* (Services Centre) under Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989). *Maktab al-Khidmat* was responsible for organising the arrivals and deployment of Arab military recruits to battlefronts shoulder to shoulder with their Afghan *mujahideen* fellow warriors, and channeling international donations to support their cause

(McGregor 2003). The Taliban, whose core faction was originally based around Afghanistan's second largest city of Kandahar in the south, originated from clusters of student communities that ballooned along the Pashtun belt regions bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. The only education available to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, who at one stage numbered 3 million, was in religious seminaries that benefited from aid pouring in via American and Saudi Arabian channels (Takim 2016). These *madrasahs* were largely Deobandi⁵ in orientation.

While most Malaysians were unequivocal in their material and moral support towards the liberation of Afghanistan from Soviet-style communism, as exemplified in the country's boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, a few Malay-Muslim youngsters participated directly in the frontlines of the Afghan battlefields within the ranks of the *mujahideen*. Most of these zealous youths had been privately sponsored students in *madrasahs* in nearby Pakistan. One report prepared for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) estimated that for the period 1985-1995, 'around 300-400 Indonesians and Malaysians trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan as anti-Soviet mujahideen....' (Fealy and Funston 2016: 9). It is from these cohorts that early seeds of Islamist⁶ extremism were sowed in Malaysia as the 'blowback effect' began to set in upon their return to Malaysia.

Islamist Extremism in Malaysia: The Afghan Connection

While the number of Malay-Muslims who joined the anti-Soviet *jihad* (holy war) campaigns in Afghanistan dwarfs in comparison to foreign fighters who arrived there from Arab countries, their impact upon returning to Malaysia has been no less significant. As Abuza (2003: 136) notes, '...the Afghanistan experience was the formative experience in the Southeast Asian jihadis' lives.' It was in Afghanistan that the Malaysians rubbed shoulders with jihadists from all over the world, including some with legendary reputations in the annals of the history of modern *jihad*. For many, fighting on the ground in a global *jihad* was a baptism of fire from which they were never able to

⁵ The Sunni revivalist school of thought that emerged at the height of British colonial rule in India in late nineteenth century, based at the Dar al-'Ulum Islamic seminary in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh. Its main difference with Wahhabism (see fn. 9 below) lies in its measured acceptance of Sufism in a reformist mould, rather than rejection of Sufism as Wahhabis are inclined to do. Deobandism is thought to have evolved from the teachings of Shah Wali Allah al-Dihlawi (1703-1762).

⁶ 'Islamist' as used here is adjectival to Islamism - a political ideology that demands the establishment of a juridical Islamic state governed by the *syariah* (Islamic law) in order for practising Muslims to be able to realise the ideals of Islam as a comprehensive way of life (*din al-hayah*), rather than referring to Islam as religious faith *per se*, to which the adjective 'Islamic' applies. For a fuller elaboration of Islamism in the Malaysian context, see Liow (2009).

extricate themselves from, not that they ever wanted to. Some went to the extent of abandoning their religious studies as they got immersed by the day into the physical exertion routine of a holy warrior. Physical fighting transformed their lives into that of a full-fledged military fighter, for whom battlefield combat assumed the role of a vocation rather than an avocation. *Jihad* had evolved into a career for them – a voluntary one to which they were fully devoted and of whose veracity they had not the slightest doubt.

Once fighting ceased, as when the Soviet Union declared an end to its Afghanistan occupation in 1989, a deluge of problems would emerge. Jihadists had mastered no other craft besides fighting. The limited religious education they had acquired during their overseas venture was enough just to establish *madrassahs* back home, most of which lacked sufficient facilities and manpower to impart modern scientific education. Malaysia in fact became a theatre for jihadists plotting future operations on a global scale. That a few Malaysians would be dragged into the dragnet was inevitable. Although their involvement in such meetings might have been on a personal basis, many of them bore connections to PAS such as Nik Adli Nik Aziz, son of the party's long-time *Mursyid al-'Am* (General Guide) Nik Aziz Nik Mat (1931-2015). Foundational meetings leading to the formations of the infamous terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah (JI) by the Indonesian fugitives Abu Bakar Basyir and Abdullah Sungkar, and of *Rabitah al-Mujahidin* – a JI-initiated loose network of Southeast Asian jihadists, had taken place both in Malaysia (Ramakrishna 2005). While on exile in Malaysia from 1985 to 1999, Sungkar and Basyir had arranged for the training and sending of foot soldiers from Indonesia's rebel movement Dar al-Islam (DI) to Afghanistan; it was this DI diaspora that morphed into JI as an entity in its own right in 1993 (Sariburaja 2013).

Remobilisation of Malaysia's Afghan war alumni took off in 1995 with the founding of *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia* (KMM: *Mujahidin* Group of Malaysia) by Afghan war veteran Zainon Ismail, who was also a state-level PAS Youth executive committee member in Kedah. The core pioneers of KMM were members of *Halaqah Pakindo* (Association of Malaysian Graduates of Pakistan, India and Indonesia), most of whom also bore PAS connections. From its outset, KMM's struggle was driven by its objectives of purifying society via the installation of *Syariah* laws in an Islamic state and protecting PAS leaders from being harmed by what they saw was a secular government led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). In 1999, Zainon passed on KMM's leadership to Nik Adli Nik Aziz. KMM's Kedah cell was led by Mohd Lotfi

Ariffin, who in 2014 would court notoriety for his battlefield exploits in Syria on behalf of the rebel group *Ajnad al-Sham* which was not linked to either Al Qaeda or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Before KMM's unravelling by the security forces in August 2001,⁷ Mohd Lotfi and other top KMM individuals such as Zainuri Kamarudin, Zulkifli Abd Hir aka Marwan, Murad Halimuddin and Rafi Udin had volunteered as foreign fighters in the Indonesian Muslim-Christian conflict zones of Ambon and Poso (Kamarulnizam 2009).

Back home in Malaysia, KMM members hatched plots to bomb Hindu temples, attack police stations and rob banks to fund their jihadist activities. Their criminal activity reached a high point when they gunned down Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) politician Dr Joe Fernandez in November 2000, having suspected him of spreading Christianity to Malay-Muslim female factory workers in Kulim, Kedah. KMM-JI connections were cemented through personal contacts between Abu Bakar Basyir, Riduan Isamuddin aka Hambali and KMM's hyperactive Selangor cell led by Zulkifli Abd Hir (Kamarulnizam 2005). By coopting KMM into JI's regional network, Malaysian Islamist militants gradually imbibed the *takfiri*⁸ narrative of apostatizing fellow Muslim rulers who stubbornly refused to implement *Syariah* laws despite having the power to do so. Through the imposing figures of Basyir and Hambali, KMM's ideology was radicalised from a version of neo-Salafism⁹ that focused on fighting the 'far enemy' i.e non-Muslim forces such as Zionists, Christians and communists occupying Muslim lands (Ramakrishna 2003), to one that sought to overthrow the 'near enemy,' i.e. hypocritical Muslim governments which were no better than the infidel rulers.

On a global scale, this represented a doctrinal shift in international *jihadism* from the paradigm of Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989) to that of the radical Egyptian Islamist thinker Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj (1954-1982), who was executed for his role in the assassination

⁷ After which its abbreviation of KMM acquired the newly sensationalised meaning of *Kumpulan Militan Malaysia* (Militant Group of Malaysia).

⁸ *Takfiri* is adjectival to *takfir*, which refers to the practice of arbitrarily excommunicating a fellow Muslim from the fold of Islam, for which the apostate purportedly deserves to be killed.

⁹ Salafism refers to the puritanical school of thought that insists that Muslims as a matter of principle return to the ways and norms of the *salaf al-salih* i.e. 'pious predecessors' who lived within 300 years of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The origins of Salafi thought is conventionally traced to the unorthodox teachings of the controversial theologian Ibn Taimiyyah (1263-1328), whose paradigm in turn influenced the Nejd-based revivalist Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792), from whose name we derive his eponymous puritanical stream that collaborated with tribal leader Muhammad ibn Saud (1710-1765) in founding three Saudi states run on Wahhabi religious principles. Marrying both currents as Salafi-Wahhabism enables us to differentiate it from other Salafi strains such as the Egyptian-based Al-Manar reformist circle spearheaded by Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935).

of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981 (Ramakrishna 2005). The shift was reportedly countenanced by Abdullah Azzam's own disciple Osama ben Laden, but reached logical heights in the methods adopted by ISIS many years later as its war against the Shi'a governments of Iraq and Syria intensified. Indeed, visceral hatred and excommunication of the Shi'ites were definitive traits in the ideological make-up of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006), ISIS's forefather who had founded its predecessor Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Hassan 2016). As for Malaysia's ex-Afghan veterans who had moved to combat zones in Syria following the government's clampdown on KMM and JI, the radical shift was exemplified in the conversion of such figures as Zainuri Kamarudin and Rafi Udin to ISIS's cause, as shown by their appearances in ISIS's propaganda videos. After Mohd Lotfi's death in 2014, Malaysian jihadists gradually migrated from the relatively meek *Ajnad al-Sham* to ISIS (Dass and Singh 2022).

Ramification of the Takeover Impact: The Regional Context

With the pivotal role played by Afghanistan as a theatre of physical *jihad* in which Malaysian Muslims had triumphantly participated, the Taliban's return to power and declaration of Afghanistan as an Islamic Emirates raised alarm bells among security experts monitoring trends of global violent extremism. To a vast majority of the armchair pundits, the Taliban had always been and will forever be a terrorist outfit. Just short of panicking, most commentators predicted a sharp rise in extremist activity flowing between Afghanistan and Southeast Asia. Greg Barton (2021) paints a gloomy picture of the probable scenario: '...the mountains of Afghanistan will once again become home to mujahideen from across Asia and around the world. Jihadi camps in Afghanistan will return to making a significant contribution to the recruitment, radicalisation, training and networking of new generations of jihadi fighters and movements in South-East Asia The stage is set for a new era of terrorist growth in South-East Asia and around the world. The IS motto of "**remaining and expanding**" rang hollow in the wake of the destruction of the caliphate. Now, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is set to eclipse the caliphate in scale and longevity, the jihadi catch-cry appears to have been met with divine vindication.'

A lot of the early analyses had failed to capture the Taliban as an evolving entity that was capable of change. Security analysts were prone to lump the Taliban together with the likes of Al

Qaeda and ISIS in the network of global Islamism that espoused principles of Salafi-jihadism¹⁰ that had been driving the Muslim insurrection against Western hegemony as symbolised at the highest level in the 9-11 incident. Local nuances of the Taliban were lost on such foreign commentaries that it was simplistically assumed to be ‘Wahhabi’¹¹ as per the Middle Eastern puritanical strain (cf. Jennings 2021), when a more appropriate label for it would have been the South Asian-conditioned ‘Deobandi’ revivalist stream (Ingram 2018, Jaafari 2021). This does not deny, however, that overlapping between both puritanical traditions does exist. It was, in fact, Saudi Arabian patronage on top of American aid for the Afghan resistance against Soviet Union funneled through Pakistan that radicalised along Salafi-Wahhabi lines many Deobandi *madrasahs* that mushroomed along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the 1980s (Rana and Ganguly 2021).

So widespread was the Western media myth-making surrounding the Taliban that two young European researchers, Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, based on their five-year fieldwork in the heart of the Taliban’s spiritual capital in Kandahar, published a book in 2012 to refute the theory of a grand alliance between Al Qaeda and Taliban (Shahrani 2014). They show that, the personal friendship between Osama Ben Laden and Taliban supremo Mullah Mohammad Omar (1960-2013) aside, the Al Qaeda-Taliban relationship was characterised by as much Islamic solidarity as with tension. While Al Qaeda’s vision was underpinned by global jihadist considerations, the Taliban’s primary concern was liberating their country from the clutches of foreign i.e. Soviet Union from 1979 to 1989 and the USA from 2001 to 2021, rule. The Taliban’s sheltering of Ben Laden owed as much to Islam as to the Pashtunwali tribal code of honour which enjoins protecting a guest in need even if he were a foe. In Osama Ben Laden’s case, not only was he not an enemy, but he had also sacrificed his and his followers’ lives in defending Afghanistan as an independent nation. Reacting to a call by a Taliban-initiated tribal leaders’ assembly for Ben Laden to leave the country (Prakash 2003), Mullah Mohammad Omar justified his stand: ‘Islam says that when a Muslim asks for shelter, give the shelter and never hand him over to enemy. And our Afghan tradition says that, even if your enemy asks for shelter, forgive him and give him

¹⁰ The version of Salafism that recommends the use of *jihad qital* (physical fighting) against the enemies of Islam in pursuit of its puritanical aims and objectives.

¹¹ Sometimes used interchangeably with ‘Salafism,’ ‘Wahhabism’ refers more properly to the puritanical stream of thought founded on the doctrinal teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792) in the Arabian Peninsula. The term ‘Wahhabi,’ however, has also through the years acquired the abusive connotation of being related to any reformist stripe that deviates from orthodox Sunni theology.

shelter. Osama has helped the jihad in Afghanistan, he was with us in bad days and I am not going to give him to anyone' (Bergen 2015).

The Taliban argued that extraditing Ben Laden contradicted international legal norms and Afghan public opinion: '.... Bin Laden has not been tried but the United States have convicted him and are offering \$5 million as a reward for his capture. And they never offered us any evidence that he is involved in international terrorist networks. Afghan popular opinion is against the extradition of Osama Bin Laden' (Yusoff 2001: 58-59). It was in fact the USA-engineered ouster of Taliban and President Hamid Karzai's USA-propped regime's exclusion of it from post-conflict negotiations that drew the Taliban closer to Al Qaeda as it began its war of attrition to regain the country (Shahrani 2014). The Taliban obtained sweet revenge against the Afghan government in 2018 in Qatar, when Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar struck a deal with the USA government represented by Afghan-born diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad to end the 20-year hostilities by a full-scale withdrawal of American troops. This time, it was the turn of the Afghanistan government to be excluded from negotiations, much to the exasperation of President Ashraf Ghani. Back in 2013, Ghani's predecessor Karzai had had to endure the insult of witnessing the establishment of the Taliban's political headquarters in Doha, which functioned in the manner of a 'government in exile,' all under the USA's approving eyes (DeYoung 2021).

As far as the Malaysian Muslims' response to the Taliban's regaining the reins of power in Afghanistan is concerned, the present research seeks to investigate the dynamics that have taken place within Islamist networks since the dramatic August 2021 changeover of government in Kabul. By looking at indicators such as recruitment activity, training efforts, online radicalisation, social media discussions, direct contacts between Malaysia and Afghanistan, and statements by state-linked figures, we are able to gauge the extent to which the Taliban takeover will galvanise Islamist extremism in Malaysia. In order to gather the information required, the researchers embarked on a series of interviews with relevant stakeholders as listed in Table 1 below:

No.	Informant	Designation	Interview Date	Platform
1.	Mohd Azmi bin Abdul Hamid (popularly known as Cikgu Azmi)	President, Malaysian Consultative Council for Islamic Organisations/Majlis Perundingan	11 March 2022	Google Meet

		Pertubuhan Islam Malaysia (MAPIM)		
2.	Dr Ahmad el-Muhammady bin Uthman el-Muhammady	Assistant Professor, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC-IIUM) and Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague, Netherlands	16 March 2022	Zoom
3.	Datuk Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman	Malaysian Foreign Minister's Special Advisor on Afghanistan, Commissioner to the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Chairman of Global Peace Mission Malaysia (GPM)	12 April 2022	Interview at his office in Gombak
4.	Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Normah Ishak	Principal Assistant Director of the Bukit Aman Special Branch's Counter-Terrorism Division (E8)	12 April 2022	Zoom
5.	Ahmad Fahmi Mohd. Shamsuddin	Vice President of ABIM/CEO GPM	20 April 2022	Interview at his office in Gombak

6.	Datuk Seri Salahuddin bin Ayob	Chairman of International Bureau, Parti AMANAH Negara, Member of Parliament for Pulai and former Minister of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry (May 2018 – February 2020)	6 April 2022	WhatsApp
7.	Assoc. Prof. Dr Mohd. Mizan Mohammad Aslam	Strategic and Anti-Terrorism Expert Researcher, Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UNIMAP)	19 May 2022	Zoom
8.	Ahmad Anuar Abdul Rahman	Advisory board member of Global Ikhwan Sendirian Berhad Holdings (GISBH)	13 June 2022	WhatsApp

Table 1: List of stakeholders interviewed.

The Taliban 2.0 Takeover Impact on Islamist Extremism in Malaysia

During the pre-Taliban 2.0 administrations of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, Malaysian links to Afghanistan – a country fully dependent on foreign aid to survive since being engulfed by the ravages of wars that included both military campaigns to expel external aggressors and intra-*mujahideen* warlord-based clashes, had been mainly in the form of medical and humanitarian supplies channeled through the Ministry of Defense (AP 2010). Once the transfer of power was effected, words of congratulations were forthcoming from Muhammad Khalil Abdul Hadi, chairman of PAS’s International Affairs and Foreign Relations Bureau who was also state assemblyman for Batu Buruk in Terengganu – a state which PAS had been administering since May 2018, and son of PAS President Haji Abdul Hadi Awang (henceforth ‘Haji Hadi’) (Muhammad Khalil 2021a). This was followed by exhortations from PAS Youth to the Malaysian

government to forge diplomatic relations with the Taliban 2.0 government in Afghanistan (M Fakhru and Yasmin 2021). While PAS had been on record for organising demonstrations against the USA's military incursions against a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 2001, thus cementing PAS's image as an extremist opposition party (Farish 2002), the situation in 2021 was different. PAS was now a member of Malaysia's federal government, having been a component member of the ruling Perikatan Nasional (PN: National Alliance) administration led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin from March 2020 until August 2021, and succeeded by UMNO Vice President Ismail Sabri Yaakob's Premiership since August 2021 upon Muhyiddin losing his majority in Parliament. Under both administrations, Haji Hadi played the role of the Prime Minister's special envoy to the Middle East. Any statement made by PAS officials now carry a semblance of legitimacy, even if issued in a personal capacity. Furthermore, under Ismail Sabri Yaakob as Prime Minister, PAS monopolised the Islamic Affairs portfolios via the appointments of party Vice President Idris Ahmad as a Senator and Minister in Prime Minister's Department, and of Pengkalan Chepa Member of Parliament (MP) Ahmad Marzuk Shaary as Deputy Minister in Prime Minister's Department – a position **he was holding** since March 2020.

In February 2022, on the occasion his four-day working visit to Qatar, Haji Hadi announced, in the presence of Taliban 2.0's permanent representative to the United Nations (UN), Suhail Shaheen, the Malaysian government's commitment to assist Afghanistan with economic and humanitarian aid. Haji Hadi's pledge did not go down well with elements of Malaysia's civil society and opposition parties who viewed his 'jumping the gun' as amounting to de facto recognition of Taliban 2.0's rule (Sherman and Langan 2022). Among their major concerns were the heavily circumscribed rights of women and religious minorities under the Taliban (cf. Mariam 2022). Responding to wide criticisms that Haji Hadi had allegedly exceeded his authority, Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah confirmed in Parliament that Haji Hadi's Qatar meeting had received Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob's approval (Babulal 2022). Indeed, the Foreign Ministry had been involved in discussions on human rights with Taliban 2.0 back in November 2021, mediated by the non-governmental organisation Global Peace Mission Malaysia (GPM) under the leadership of its chairman Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman (Kaur 2022). Following up on Haji Hadi's engagement with the Taliban 2.0 government, Haji Hadi received an official visit from Afghanistan's erstwhile envoy to Malaysia, Dr Moheb Rahman Spingar, whose ambassadorial duties he claimed outlasted the change of government amidst prevailing political uncertainty in

Kabul (Malaysiakini 2022). PAS's antics in government, however, did not escape the prying eyes of the security apparatus. In April 2022, during an Indonesian-hosted webinar entitled 'Next Generation Afghan Alumni? Assessments From SEA,' Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Normah Ishak, chief of Royal Malaysia Police's (RMP) Counter-Terrorism Division or better known by the abbreviation 'E8,' censured PAS for purposely using its social media praises of Taliban 2.0 to shore up its Islamic credentials. This unfortunately ipso facto legitimised Taliban 2.0 regardless of the continuing disparities in values held between the group and the more open Malaysian Muslims (FMT Reporters 2022).

A recent editorial of the *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* (CTTA) journal published by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) based at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, notes that based on the 'United Nations Security Council's February 2022 report on Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) ... the notion surrounding Afghanistan's slide back into a hub of transnational terrorism seems exaggerated' (Editorial Note 2022). Multiple factors until now have hampered the re-emergence of Afghanistan as a terrorist hub despite the Doomsday prognostications proffered by self-proclaimed security experts. The primary factor revolves around internecine clashes pitting different militant groups against one another and against the Taliban 2.0 government. The IS-K, which maintains strongholds in north-western Afghanistan, continues to wreak havoc in metropolitan areas now controlled by Taliban 2.0, which IS-K accuses of not only heterodoxy but also of acting in cahoots with the USA. One is reminded of the IS-K-launched suicide bombing of the Hamid Karzai International Airport on 26 August 2021 – a mere 11 days after Taliban 2.0's capture of Kabul, resulting in 169 Afghans and 13 US servicemen losing their lives. Throughout 2021 alone, of the 1,237 terrorist attacks carried out in Afghanistan killing 2,210 civilians, IS-K was responsible for 365 or almost 30 per cent of them (Sharma 2022). Two Malaysians were initially reported by the international press to be among IS-K militants arrested following a gun fight between IS-K and Taliban forces – a point taken up by Dass and Singh (2022) based on Farik Zolkepli's (2021) report, but this was refuted by DCP Normah Ishak (interview, 12 April 2022), who clarified that the two detainees were in fact Indonesians. DCP Normah also confirmed that based on intelligence reports no Malaysian has been found to be involved in IS-K, let alone to travel to Afghanistan to fight alongside IS-K's troops.

Such a convoluted scenario is hardly a reason for the global jihadist community to rejoice over. It confuses would-be jihadists regarding which side to favour if one were to undertake the journey to join *jihad* in Afghanistan. As the reality of reconstruction and nation-building sets in, Taliban 2.0 has understandably moderated its stances as predicted by Barton (2022): ‘The Taliban regime in Kabul (or Kandahar) will, despite the Taliban’s existential commitment to global jihad, likely seek to distance itself from such camps. It will exploit plausible deniability, as it focuses on rehabilitating and reinventing its international reputation and securing the long-term viability of the Islamic emirate. This will potentially have the not insignificant benefit of restraining the Taliban from some of the brutal excesses of the past, particularly with respect to the oppression of women and the persecution of minority groups like the Hazara.’

As the ICPVTR Editorial Note (2022) referred to above cautions against resting on our laurels as it may take as long as 12 to 18 months for jihadist groups to re-organise and re-calibrate their activities, the crux of the matter seems to hover around the question of whether Taliban 2.0 has betrayed the cause of jihad. For Western observers, the nitpicking queries appear to be, ‘Has Taliban changed’ or ‘is Taliban capable of changing at all?’ Former USA Marine Corps Intelligence Officer Scott Ritter was unequivocal on the incapacity of Western minds to comprehend the Taliban as an evolving entity, away from its terrorist-laden image: ‘... I’ll push back on the Taliban being a terrorist organisation. The Taliban is an Afghan political reality. It’s not a terrorist organisation, any more than we are a terrorist organisation We actually committed far more acts of terrorism in the 20-year experience in Afghanistan than the Taliban ever did’ (Renegade Inc. 2021). In Ritter’s critical assessment, the USA’s defeat in Afghanistan was inevitable once ‘... the US political and military establishment refused to accept the possibility that the Taliban could be negotiated with and claims they were ignorant of the Pashtun people’s tribal code – the Pashtunawali – which if successfully tapped into, could have given the US leverage over hearts and minds,’ positing further that ‘a sensible strategy going forward would be for the United States to recognise that the Taliban in power today is not the Taliban of two decades ago’ (Renegade Inc. 2021).

Interviews conducted by the present researchers indicate a broad consensus among Malaysian stakeholders in Afghanistan-related matters that it is imperative to engage directly with their Afghan brethren in order to prevent an enveloping humanitarian disaster since the USA-imposed freezing of funds in the Afghan central banking system since Taliban 2.0 wrested power

(Democracy Now! 2022, The Hill 2022). On the USA's worry that injected funds would reach Taliban 2.0's hands rather than the people of Afghanistan, Dr Mohd Mizan Aslam (interview, 19 May 2022), who spent 10 days in Herat and Kabul in April 2022 with the humanitarian group Muslim Care, explains that Malaysian NGOs helping to alleviate the enveloping food crisis in Afghanistan deal with Afghan NGOs, not the Taliban 2.0 government. Until now, the Malaysian NGOs have been fastidious in making sure that donations in funds and in kind reach the needy and strictly avoid jihadist coffers. Dr Mohd Mizan, who had a face-to-face meeting with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – the Islamist who enjoyed 2 brief spells as Prime Minister during Afghanistan's civil strife in the 1990s, admits that his perception of Afghanistan under Taliban has changed considerably after seeing conditions on the ground and communicating directly with Taliban commanders. Dr Mohd Mizan laments the sluggishness of Malaysia in responding to pleas of help from Afghanistan, in contrast to non-Muslim countries such as China and Russia. Even Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as merciless as he would appear to outsiders, had a soft heart when it came to Malaysia – a country that Afghans generally looked up to as a model modern Islamic state. Similar regrets at Malaysia's hesitancy were also expressed by Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid (interview, 11 March 2022), whose Majlis Perundangan Pertubuhan Islam Malaysia (MAPIM: Malaysian Consultative Council for Islamic Organisations) has also engaged directly with officials of the Taliban 2.0 administration in Kabul.

The point of Malaysia being the paragon of Islam par excellence to Afghans was also emphasised by Ahmad Fahmi Mohd Shamsuddin (interview, 20 April 2022), Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) Vice President and chief executive officer of Global Peace Mission Malaysia (GPM) which has been aiding Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts for 20 years. In fact, Ahmad Fahmi mentions prime factors influencing Afghans' high regard for Malaysia: the global standing of former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's undying commitment to the Mujahideen during the days of the anti-Soviet resistance, and the ability of Malaysia to enlist help even from non-Muslims, referring for example to the meeting arranged between Malaysian Buddhist charities with Afghan NGOs. Even former President Hamid Karzai of the old USA-supported regime welcomes Malaysia's relief efforts that cut across ethnic and religious boundaries, besides expressing great disappointment at the outcome of the USA's 20-year occupation during which corruption was rampant.

GPM, the de facto leader of Malaysia's humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, is chaired by Dato' Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman (interview, 12 April 2022), a former Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) President in his younger days and active also as Deputy Secretary General of the Istanbul-based Union of NGOs of the Islamic World (UNIW). In September 2021, during an online conference on 'Afghanistan: Re Emergence of a Nation,' Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah announced Malaysia's Foreign Ministry's appointment of Ahmad Azam as its special advisor on Afghanistan affairs. On the occasion of this conference co-hosted by ABIM and GPM, GPM's #PeduliAfghanistan (Care for Afghanistan) Fund was launched for the express purpose of collecting RM1 million to boost supplies of food, shelter, sanitation and health facilities to desperate Afghan families facing a harsh winter. Saifuddin also shed light on Malaysia's relentless commitment to help Afghanistan in spite of the regime change; the Malaysia Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP) had in fact been training Afghan civil servants in administration, taxation and finance since 2002, and two Malaysian companies had already been invited to embark on infrastructural rehabilitation and reconstruction in Afghanistan (BERNAMA 2021). In the realm of higher education, Ahmad Azam clarified to Afghan higher educationists, the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) towers above other institutions in reputation and goodwill, moreso with the important roles that IIUM local alumni play in Afghan society.

During his 10-day visit to Afghanistan in February 2022, Ahmad Azam's delegation met with not only high-ranking officials of the previous and present governments, but also private entrepreneurs, with a view towards sealing collaborative projects with Malaysian businessmen who had accompanied him to Afghanistan. Indeed, among members of his entourage were two advisory board members of Global Ikhwan Sendirian Berhad Holdings (GISBH), Hasnan Abdul Hamid and Ahmad Anuar Abdul Rahman (interview, 13 June 2022; Anjang 2022). GISBH is a bustling Malay-Muslim corporation that has carved a niche for itself in the catering and food and beverages industries, with restaurant chains all over Southeast Asia including London, Manchester, Paris, Maintal (Germany), Istanbul, Amman, Cairo, Perth and Sydney in Australia and Mecca in Saudi Arabia (cf. Ahmad Fauzi 2015). Inheriting its business and Islamist connections from the Darul Arqam movement banned by the Malaysian government in 1994, in early June 2022 GISBH began discussions with Syeikh Abu Talhah, an Afghan businessman based

in Medina, Saudi Arabia, to invest in land and property development in Mazar-i-Sharif,¹² Afghanistan's fourth largest city in the country's north (GISB Holdings 2022). Earlier, on 23 April 2022, GISBH had launched its own Tabung Bantuan Afghanistan (Afghanistan Relief Fund) in a public function graced by Ahmad Azam in Alor Setar, Kedah (Anjang Muor 2022).

A salient aspect that came out in the interviews the present researchers conducted was the importance of trusting the Afghans' own judgement in deciding what form of rule and government best suited them. Backed by fieldwork experience in Afghanistan, our informants stressed the fact that to Afghans, Taliban or not, a multi-party democracy with competitive elections would not be suitable for them at this point of time. Dr Ahmad el-Muhammady (interview, 16 March 2022), who has vast experience in interviewing, testifying against and deradicalising violent Islamist extremists in Malaysian prisons, asserts the significance of understanding Afghan culture, social norms and political perspectives. Having been dragged to war for the past 40 odd years, the ordinary Afghan citizen is tired of the incessant fighting. The USA's lack of appreciation of local culture served as the main cause of its undoing; it simply failed to win the hearts and minds of the local population and rode roughshod over them instead through a monopoly over state-linked resources. Under the USA, Afghanistan became completely dependent on foreign aid; the USA becoming political masters that totally ignored building integrity and trust into the governance system they were presiding over. Would it be fair now to force multi-party democracy down the throats of the Afghan populace, when the USA itself as the so-called champion of democracy did not practice what they preached when given the opportunity to administer Afghanistan? As Taliban 2.0 related directly to Dr Mohd Mizan and Ahmad Azam, they would prefer sticking to the traditional *loya jirga* (grand assembly or council of elders) method of governance, in accordance with not only the Pashtunwali tradition but also the Islamic concept of *syura* (consultation). Extremism cannot be measured here vis-à-vis liberal democratic principles as outlined for instance by Schmid (2014).

Not only did Dr Ahmad deny that Taliban exports extremism as it is only interested in expelling the enemy out of Afghanistan, but Islamism in post-Taliban Afghanistan has lost its pull

¹² Mazar-i-Sharif was the scene of horrific massacres and counter-massacres in 1997-1998 pitting the Pashtun-dominated Taliban 1.0 against the Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum of the Northern Alliance and the Hazara Shi'ites. The Northern Alliance's official designation was *Jab ha-yi Muttahid-i Islāmi-yi Millī barāyi Nijāt-i Afghānistān*, or the United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan. Dostum later became Vice President of Afghanistan from September 2014 to February 2020.

factor for Islamist foreign fighters. With the American departure, the *raison d'être* for *jihad* for Malaysian extremists has simply vanished. Even the veteran Afghan alumnus fighter Yazid Sufaat,¹³ who is now a free man after serving two hefty jails terms (2001-2008, 2013-2019), has declared to Dr Ahmad that he is uninterested in returning to Afghanistan even if given the chance to do so. For a jihadist to be making a trip to Afghanistan at the present moment of time would be tantamount to killing fellow Muslims – an abhorrent deed unless one was a diehard *takfiri* (cf fn. 8).

The point on jihadists now being denied a clearly non-Muslim or ‘infidel’ enemy was also emphasised by DCP Normah Ishak, who also pointed out that even on social media, E8’s monitoring unit has not detected any burning desire among Malaysian Muslim extremists to fight in Afghanistan. The possibility of Malaysian jihadists making the way to Afghanistan is further reduced by the drastic decrease in the number of Malaysian students pursuing education in neighbouring Pakistan, not to mention the advent of social media which has enabled interested observers to simply tune in at the click of a computer mouse if the need to follow events overseas arises, even in real time should the technology allow. In DCP Normah’s assessment, based on intelligence data gathering, Taliban 2.0 does not or at least has not yet shown signs of resurrecting the strict conservative codes that Taliban 1.0 was notorious for, for its priority is now the restoration of order and overcoming the food crisis. Ahmad Azam admits though that in the purview of women’s rights, Taliban 2.0 has to be given time to change. He was referring to Taliban 2.0 supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada’s vetoing the government’s decision to open secondary schools for girls.

Our empirical findings may be summarised in Figure 1 below:

¹³ For more on Yazid Sufaat’s recruitment activities for Al Qaeda, see Dass and Singh (2022), especially pp. 4-5.

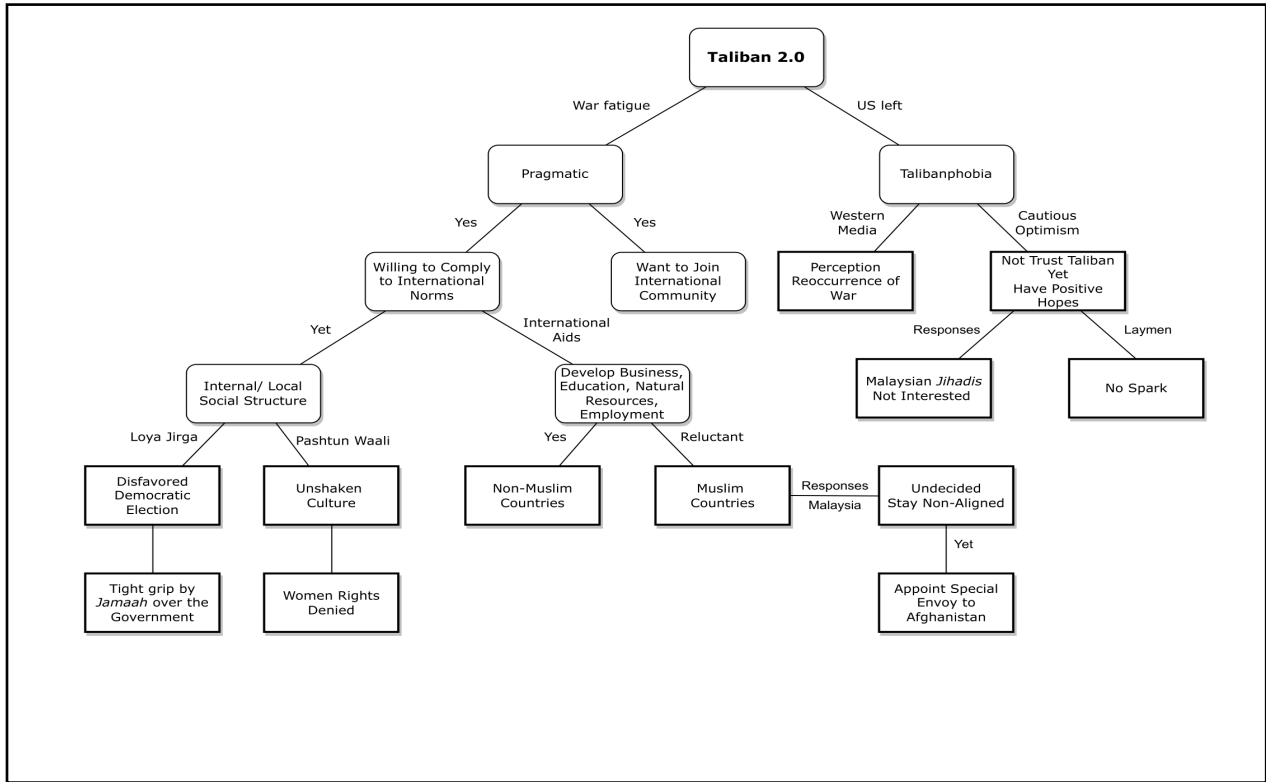


Figure 1: New Landscape of Taliban 2.0 and the Malaysian Islamists’ Response Framework

The framework in Figure 1 above depicts the two-fold responses in Malaysia over the rise of Taliban 2.0. Belligerent parties involved in the protracted war in Afghanistan suffered from fatigue and hopelessness due to the losses of thousands of lives, energy and resources; hence they decided to end the war and hand the country over to Taliban 2.0 simply because it was the group most prepared to rule in the wake of the collapse of the old order. While its younger generation expresses eagerness to join the comity of nations and thereby comply to international norms and charters, Taliban 2.0 faces the existential dilemma of having its executive decisions filtered by the *jamaah* (congregation) led by the powerful spiritual leader, *Amir al-Mu'minin*. This two-layered decision-making procedure slows down the process of reform and development, which can progress only on the condition that it respects local culture and traditional beliefs and customs, a lot of which are influenced by Islam as understood and practised in the local Afghan context. In their determination to showcase their seriousness in rebranding the image of the Taliban, they have ceased encouraging foreign Muslim jihadists to regard Afghanistan as a venue to fight the *kuffar*

(unbelievers). They are opening doors instead to parties interested in business cooperation, education opportunities, infrastructural development and mining of natural resources. The Western media nevertheless continues to play on war-related sentiments and themes in their reporting of Afghanistan, thus portraying Taliban 2.0 as perennially warlike. Other countries, Muslim nation states included, have therefore hesitated to officially recognise Afghanistan. This research echoes the ‘cautious optimism’ as dubbed by Mohammad Hashim Kamali, a Malaysian-based Afghan expatriate (Ahmad Mustakim 2021), but calls for more active linkages to be cultivated with Afghanistan on a government-to-government basis. Whether we like it or not, Malaysians have to come round to the fact that Taliban 2.0 is in Afghanistan to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. The researchers are confident that a more active participation by the Malaysian government in helping Afghanistan in its time of need will do well to boost Malaysia’s international image and will not be an impetus for the outpouring of jihadists into Afghanistan. Formalising communication on an official basis reduces the risk of informal networks preying on uninformed Muslim youth who might harbour an unwarranted desire to fight a physical *jihad* in the legendary killing fields of Afghanistan.

Concluding Remarks

The present research, which relies on in-depth interviews with Malaysian informants with direct experience of going to the ground in Afghanistan and engaging directly with Taliban 2.0 and members of the old USA-supported administration, has found **no** significant correlation between the rise of Taliban 2.0 and the growth of Islamist extremism in Malaysia. The two foremost academic researchers in the field of Islamist extremism, Dr Mohd Mizan Aslam of UNIMAP and Dr Ahmad el-Muhammady of IIUM, based on contacts they have cultivated with Malaysia’s Islamists, concur with our analysis that the impact of Taliban 2.0 has so far been negligible to the growth of Islamist extremism in Malaysia. In many ways, the findings of our research echo those of Liow and Arosoaie (2019) with regard to the lack of appeal of ISIS among Malay-Muslim Islamists in Malaysia. Local nuances with respect to Malay-Muslim politics and its related complexities insulate Malay-Muslims, notwithstanding their radical dispositions as conditioned by the increasing gravitational pull of Salafi-Wahhabism among them since the onset of Islamic resurgence, from global jihadist currents.

On the one hand, Taliban 2.0, while still bearing extremist traits as found in the more rigid strains of Islamism, are neither fascinated with contemporary global jihadism nor bound to the dictates of Al Qaeda, ISIS and like-minded radical Islamists. On the other hand, the more extreme wings of ISIS have excommunicated Taliban 2.0 on account of the latter's Deobandism and alleged acceptance of grave-worshipping rituals (Bunzel 2023). Malaysian Islamists, on their part, are found to be uninterested in post-Taliban 2.0 as a purportedly jihadist organisation, but have rather collated resources and the limited manpower that they have at their disposal in helping out their Afghan Muslim brethren on humanitarian grounds. Liow and Arosoaie's (2019: 87) explanation is instructive: '... while ISIS has doubtlessly managed to recruit supporters and sympathizers from Malaysia, its recruitment efforts have been hampered by a combination of effective counterterrorism operations, as well as ISIS's inability to tailor its narrative in ways that would have greater appeal to a larger pool of potential Malaysian recruits.' In Taliban 2.0's case, the insularity is mutual, thus taking away the push and pull factors that have in the past drawn Malay-Muslim Islamists into the global jihadist web.

Fatigue is another factor mentioned by both Afghan and Malaysian interlocutors to our informants as demotivating them to continue their Islamist struggle via jihadist methods. Veteran fighter Yazid Sufaat cited his senior age in rationalising his loss of interest to re-live his Afghanistan days on the battlefield; on the Afghan side similar sentiments were relayed to Dr Mohd Mizan. The younger generation, meanwhile, are contented watching live action of fighting on their mobile devices. They are conscious that E8, previously under CP Ayob Khan and now under DCP Normah Ishak, constantly monitors social media chatter, and accessing and downloading activities on the internet. As DCP Normah has confirmed with the present researchers, E8's analysis until now fails to establish any positive correlation between Taliban 2.0's ascendancy and the rise of Islamist extremism in Malaysia. Nonetheless, security agencies will not be loosening their surveillance of the flow of information and personnel travelling between Afghanistan and Malaysia. It is just when such relaxation occurs that extremists might grab the opportunity to re-ignite hitherto dormant networks and linkages.

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